

UN Conferences: Media Events or Genuine Diplomacy?



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On 15 September 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women and Development came to an end in Beijing. This conference was the seventh in a series of global special conferences held in the past five years under the aegis of the UN on economic and social matters. Three of those have come to be known as “world summits”—on children (organized by the UN Children’s Fund [UNICEF] in New York in 1990), on the environment and development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), and on social development (Copenhagen, 1995). The other conferences organized by the UN during this period have dealt with human rights (Vienna, 1993), the problems of small-island developing countries (Barbados, 1994), population and development (Cairo, 1994), and human settlements (Istanbul, 1996). The Food and Agriculture Organization is planning a food summit to take place in the fall of 1996 in Rome.

The growing number and frequency of such “conclaves” could surprise the ill-informed observer. Yet the phenomenon is hardly new, since its origins can be traced back to initiatives sponsored by the League of Nations. Nonetheless, the practice of convening large world conferences on economic and social questions did gain significant momentum with the creation of the UN. The Joint Inspection Unit reckoned that no fewer than thirty conferences of this type had been held in the 1970s.¹ The list presented in the Appendix, more comprehensive than the one established by the inspectors, is by no means exhaustive but still provides a fairly accurate idea of the magnitude and scope of this long-term trend in multilateral diplomacy.

The conference system that was progressively developed by the UN is an integral part of its existence. Predictably, it has at an early stage become the target of debate and controversy. In their report, the inspectors had already highlighted the fact that government delegations as well as members of the UN Secretariat had expressed some misgivings regarding conferences. In his 1963 annual report on the work of the organization, the secretary-general had thus drawn the attention of the General Assembly to the excessive number of special conferences and underlined the need to limit their frequency to one per year. The assembly subsequently endorsed